

# 2011 Environmental Quality Incentive Program

## Local Work Group Summary for Clovis Field Office

### Introduction:

The Clovis Field Office is located at 918 Parkland Drive in the city of Clovis, New Mexico. The local NRCS Field Office works in conjunction with the Central Curry Soil and Water Conservation District to provide technical assistance to producers within Curry County and the panhandle of Roosevelt County. Curry County is located on the High Plains of central eastern New Mexico. The area includes dry cropland, irrigated cropland, and rangeland. All cropland has been designated as highly erodible. The irrigated cropland is primarily located in the southern portion of the county and is served by the rapidly declining High Plains Aquifer. The past 15 years have resulted in an influx of dairies from other parts of the country which capitalize on the advantages of an arid climate and abundance of locally grown feed. Cash receipts are generated from the production of corn, wheat, grain sorghum, cotton, hay, cattle, and related dairy products. Average rainfall for the area is 17.5 inches with 180 frost free days.

### Local Work Group:

The Local Work Group (LWG) is comprised of individuals from the Central Curry SWCD, FSA County Committee, New Mexico State Land Office, The Nature Conservancy, NMSU-Agricultural Science Center, US Fish & Wildlife Service, FSA Farm Loan Programs, and staff from NRCS. The LWG meeting was held on September 23, 2010. The meeting was attended by 20 individuals with the goal of gathering input and recommending any changes with regard to the FY 2011 EQIP program. The minutes and attendance sheet from the Local Work Group meeting may be provided by local NRCS personnel upon request.

### Priority Resource Concerns:

Several resource concerns will be addressed under the following land uses; irrigated cropland, dry cropland, and grazing lands.

The primary resource concerns identified by the LWG on irrigated cropland include water quantity (aquifer overdraft and inefficient water use), as well as water quality (excessive nutrients and organics in groundwater). The LWG also identified irrigated cropland resource concerns of secondary importance such as soil erosion (wind) on pivot corners, fish and wildlife (inadequate cover/shelter and T&E species, declining species), soil condition (organic matter depletion) as well as air quality (undesirable air movement). The primary resource concern on dry cropland is identified as soil erosion (wind and ephemeral gully and sheet and rill). Of secondary importance are soil condition (compaction and organic matter depletion), as well as fish and wildlife (T&E species, declining species, and inadequate cover/shelter). The primary resource concern on grazing lands was identified as plant condition (noxious and invasive plants and productivity, health, and vigor). Also identified as secondary resource concerns on grazing lands were domestic animals (inadequate stock water), fish & wildlife (T&E species, declining species, inadequate cover/shelter) and soil

erosion (classic and ephemeral gullies and wind). A variety of conservation practices listed on the ranking criteria will be used to address the aforementioned resource concerns on each corresponding land use.

The LWG desires to address resource concerns related to livestock manure management as a result of the 21 permitted Animal Feeding Operation's/Confined Animal Feeding Operation's within Curry County. Applicable conservation practices will primarily address the resource concern of water quality (excessive nutrients and organics in groundwater).

The LWG also wishes to identify soil erosion (wind), fish & wildlife (T&E species, inadequate cover/shelter/water), domestic animals (inadequate shelter) and air quality (undesirable air movement) on the aforementioned land uses accomplished exclusively through the installation of windbreaks located adjacent to farmsteads, fields or dairy or other livestock facilities.

The LWG also recommended the continuation of an additional ranking criteria/funding allocation which addresses the development of wildlife habitat. Producers in the Central Curry Soil and Water Conservation District have shown considerable interest in this program. The primary objective of the program is to enhance and restore wildlife habitat in and around the area's playa lakes. In addition to wildlife habitat, the buffer zone around playa lakes is an important point of recharge to the High Plains Aquifer. Curry County has numerous playa lakes which are primarily located on rangeland. These playa lakes present a unique opportunity to do conservation planning with producers and develop alternatives which focus on wildlife benefits and underground water quantity and quality rather than strictly utilizing playas as a source of forage production for livestock. The area surrounding playa lakes is characteristically over grazed due to the increased productivity and forage species which are present. In certain instances, sediment delivery can compromise the manner in which playa lakes function. Wildlife biologists have demonstrated the necessity of improving functioning playas to provide critical habitat for migratory birds as well as resident wildlife. Healthy playas are considered keystone ecosystems that serve as critical sites of biodiversity in an area otherwise characterized by semi-arid rangelands and intensive agriculture. Active habitat management is essential for restoring and sustaining populations of many obligate grassland and shrub land bird species which have been identified as declining in numbers.

The ranking criteria will target playas on rangeland. Prescribed grazing will accomplish the desired objective of improving habitat. A specific deferment period as reflected on the ranking criteria will be required. Producers will be offered incentives of \$100.38/acre for the acreage which encompasses the playa itself and a surrounding buffer area of 150 feet. In addition, producers could receive an incentive of \$7.61/acre for the adjacent rangeland acreage, with the \$7.61/acre incentive payment not to exceed 320 acres. The incentives will be offered for a period of three years.

Due to the critical rate of decline of the High Plains Aquifer, the Local Work Group has determined that replacement of existing pivots which have exceeded their lifespan by new pivots will be not allowed. New pivots will be only be eligible for cost share if the application is selected for contract funding through the

ranking process, land has been irrigated 2 of the last 5 years and water has been applied down the crop furrow

### **Funding Considerations:**

The LWG discussed the allocation of funds to the priority resource concerns. Consensus was met with funds to be allocated as follows:

Irrigated Cropland – 31.5%

Dry Cropland – 41%

Rangeland – 15%

Headquarters (Animal Feeding Operation) – 5%

Headquarters (Windbreaks – 5%

Wildlife Habitat Improvement (Playa lakes) – 2.5%

In the event that dollars remain in any category, the remaining funds will be adjusted and reallocated to fund additional applications in land uses where the demand for dollars is greatest.

### **Cost Share Rate Factor:**

A cost share rate factor of 75% for all structural practices is recommended in the computation of a payment schedule. The payment schedule will be available on the web at the New Mexico NRCS home page (Section I of the Field Office Technical Guide).

The LWG is recommending a payment of \$7.61/acre for prescribed grazing (528A) when applied to enhance habitat for the Lesser Prairie Chicken. The incentive will be awarded if a confirmed lek site is within two miles of EQIP contracted acreage and pastures are deferred from grazing for a time frame specified as August 1 through June 1.

The LWG is also recommending a payment of \$22.80/acre on dry or irrigated cropland for producers who apply the practice of Residue Management, No-Till or Strip Till (329). It is a stipulation that if an incentive is received for no-till/strip-till, crops such as grain sorghum, wheat or other high residue crops may not be baled, grazed, or harvested for ensilage on contracted acres. If crop residues are removed, the objective of increased soil organic matter will never be achieved. Soil condition as well may be compromised due to the increased possibility of limited stand establishment when compaction occurs due to livestock grazing. However, grazing will be allowed only on planted wheat acres. Producers rely on the revenue generated from grazing livestock from November 1 through March 15. Justification for the recommendation of \$22.80/acre is based on the fact that no-till is not a widely adopted conservation practice within the

Central Curry SWCD. The LWG is recommending the practice be limited to no more than 320 acres for three consecutive years on dry or irrigated cropland. Producers are eligible for this incentive payment only once regardless of county. Producers currently applying no-till/strip-till, or who have previously received cost share payments for this practice are not eligible.

Payments for Irrigation Water Management will be offered through the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program and are specified in the proposal for the East Area.

Payments offered under the Wildlife Habitat Improvement ranking criteria for Deferred Grazing are mentioned previously and requested at \$100.38/acre for playa lakes and \$7.61/acre for rangeland adjacent to playa lakes, not to exceed 320 acres on upland acres.

The payment will continue for EQIP 2011 to encourage producers to leave their Ground and Surface Water Conservation Program acreages in permanent vegetation after the water saving incentive has expired. This incentive payment would also be applicable to all producers who had planted cropland to permanent native vegetation in any year 2000-2010. This incentive would result in producers who choose to plant cropland back to grass an additional monetary bonus to plant a good mixture of native plant species and to continue to manage the acreage for wildlife after the native vegetation is established. The following guidelines have been established:

- A minimum of three native grasses, one forb, and one shrub must have been planted in the seed mixture.
- The shrub and forb components must be interseeded into at least 50% of an existing grass stand to obtain eligibility.
- On newly planted acreage not enrolled in the G&SW program, the Wildlife Incentive may be applied for under a new contract the year after the planting is completed.
- On land enrolled in G & SW program, the Wildlife Incentive will not begin until the year after the final IWM payment has been made.
- Livestock may be grazed on the enrolled acreage during the months of June and July provided a prescribed grazing plan is adhered to.
- The incentive payment will be \$24.09/ac/year for three years.
- Applications for the program will be ranked using the field office's Dry Cropland ranking.
- Funds for contracts will be drawn from the field office's Dry Cropland pool of funds.
- In the event of a tie in ranking score, the pro-rated erodibility Index of the mapped soils in the field will be used as a tie breaker – the higher ranking being given to the higher erodibility index.

By allowing only acreage converted from cropland since 2000, existing rangeland and old soil bank acreage planted many years ago will not be eligible for enrollment. The forb component could include dry land alfalfa and/or clover. The shrubs could include winterfat, Four Wing saltbush, sumac, plum, or sand cherry. Interseeding the forb and shrub should not be costly and therefore will not be cost-shared. A mixture of at least three grasses, along with forbs and shrubs, will be encouraged on newly planted

acreage. Producers will be allowed to graze livestock during the months of June and July in accordance with a prescribed grazing plan. The ranking questions for the Clovis field office dry cropland results in priority funding of range plantings which incorporate the three species of native grass as well as the shrub and forb components which meet the criteria for the wildlife incentive.

The EQIP for 2011 will continue the payment for nutrient management for the Central Curry SWCD. The practice would include application of organic fertilizer from manure or compost and could be applied to both irrigated and dry cropland with the resource concern identified as soil condition/organic matter depletion. The practice would require that a soil analysis be completed during the ranking process and the practice applied according to Nutrient Management standards and specifications. The incentive rate has been established as \$26.81/ac if the field is located 10 miles or less from the source of the fertilizer and \$32.31/ac if the field is located greater than 10 miles from the source of the fertilizer. Benefits of establishing this incentive may also result in less potential of local dairymen over applying organics to cropland they own if other producers within the county utilize the resource on a broader basis. Eligibility for the nutrient management incentive may be met if organics have not been applied to the land in the last 5 years. AFO/CAFO's are not eligible to apply for the incentive on acreage they own or operate as it is assumed the application of organics is occurring on a frequent basis. When organics are applied on irrigated cropland, the ranking will reflect applications funded for this practice only after all other irrigated practices which relate to water quantity, water quantity, wind erosion, or wildlife benefits are funded. The payment for nutrient management will have a practice cap of 320 acres per contract per year.

Producers may also apply for an incentive of \$20/ac to treat Class A noxious weeds or \$15/ac to treat Class B noxious weeds. This practice is applicable to either dry cropland or rangeland and is targeted primarily to treat Musk Thistle which has been identified as an invasive species prevalent throughout the county.

Maximum cost share payment is limited to \$50,000 per contract per year for brush management (314).

#### **Ranking Criteria:**

The local ranking criteria questions are attached for land use categories. Points are assigned based on the resource concerns the LWG wishes to address by priority. The higher priority applications will be awarded contracts until funds are exhausted. Tie breakers and qualifiers are established as follows:

**Irrigated Cropland** – Ties will be broken by awarding contracts based on the greatest change in irrigation efficiency as determined by FIRS.

**Dry Cropland** – Ties will be broken and applications funded based on highest Soil EI.

**Grazing Lands** – Ties will be broken and applications funded based on highest Soil EI.

**Livestock Manure Management** – Ties will be broken by the age of dairy with the older dairies having priority.

**Windbreaks** – The tie breaker will be determined by the length of the windbreak with the longest windbreak having priority.

**Wildlife Habitat Improvement** – Ties will be broken by the size of the playa bottom in acres with contracts awarded based on the greatest number of acres.

**Agricultural Water Enhancement Program** – Ties will be broken by qualifying well production expressed as GPM/acre (with priority funding given to the higher GPM/acre).

Applications will be identified as high priority if practices such as Brush Management or Range Planting are planned. All other applications will be identified as medium priority. All applications received will be ranked.

**State Watershed Initiative:**

The Local Work Group is requesting a local watershed initiative (non CCPI) for the Blackwater Draw. The targeted watershed encompasses approximately 250,000 acres of irrigated and dry cropland in the southeastern portion of Curry County and corresponds to the area of the county where the soils are most susceptible to soil erosion. Applications will be accepted to address resource concerns associated with water quantity/aquifer overdraft, soil erosion/wind, fish and wildlife/inadequate cover, and soil condition/organic matter depletion. The identified resource concerns will be addressed by application of the three following conservation practices: Range Planting, Residue Management, No Till or Strip Till, and Nutrient Management, as well as other identified conservation practices which provide benefits to the resource base. Funding in the amount of \$100,000 will come from Field Office funds with a matching amount requested from State Office funds.

**State Small Acreage Initiative:**

The LWG is not requesting a small acreage initiative. Small farmers have not had difficulty competing against larger producer with multiple resource concerns. Funding has been adequate in recent years to fund the majority of applications, with size of the operation or number of resource concerns not being a determining factor.